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Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Belgium and the Netherlands have been confronted with relatively many citizens or residents who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join and fight with jihadist groups — 388 Belgian and 220 Dutch as estimated by the respective authorities. This article provides an overview of the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters in the Low Countries, analyzing their characteristics, motivations, and roles in the war in Syria and Iraq. It compares the Belgian and Dutch cases, focusing on key aspects, such as age, sex, and geographical and socioeconomic background.

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KEYWORDS Jihadism; foreign fighters; Syria; Iraq; Belgium; the Netherlands

Introduction

In recent years, many European countries have been confronted with citizens or residents that have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and Islamic State (IS). The larger European countries, most notably France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, have 'produced' the highest number of these jihadist foreign fighters. But smaller countries have also seen high numbers of young Muslims leaving for the battlefields in the Middle East. Two of them, Belgium and the Netherlands, have been confronted with relatively many of them compared to the size of their populations. Belgium is in fact the European country with most of these fighters per capita with 388 confirmed cases.¹ The Netherlands' authorities estimate the number of Dutch jihadists in Syria and Iraq at 220, including 70 women.²

Why have these two countries produced relatively many jihadists? This question is difficult to answer as there are many possible factors that play

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a role, ranging from national and local political contexts, and the existence of networks and leadership, to demographics and individual push and pull factors. This article aims to offer a first attempt to shed light on this question by providing an overview of the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters in the two Low Countries, by analyzing their characteristics, motivations, and roles in the war in Syria and Iraq, and by comparing the cases of Belgium and the Netherlands. Thus, the article contributes to the discussion on the topic of foreign fighters which is hampered by a lack of empirical data on the phenomenon in general and detailed information on individual cases in particular. Linked to this, there are many assumptions regarding European foreign jihadist fighters – e.g. they are very young, they are single, mainly of migrant background, and part of the lower strata of society — that need to be confronted with empirical data.

This study of Dutch and Belgian jihadist foreign fighters is based on media reports, governmental documents, court proceedings, media reports, as well interviews with key actors in relation to jihadist foreign fighters including governmental officials, Syrian refugees, friends and family members of those that have left for Syria or Iraq, and a number of active supporters of the violent jihad. In this article, the term ‘jihadist foreign fighter’ is used to describe persons who have joined a fighting group in a foreign conflict with a jihadist agenda. The term refers to both Dutch and Belgian citizens and residents of the Netherlands and Belgium. The part on the characteristics of these fighters uses the methodological framework developed by Mark Sageman³ and is based on a dataset consisting of 370 cases (of which 211 are from Belgium and 159 from the Netherlands).⁴

The outline of the article is as follows: First we provide a number of historical examples of foreign fighters from the Low Countries before focusing on cases of jihadist foreign fighters until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011. Secondly, it looks into key characteristics of these jihadists, such as age, sex, and geographical and socioeconomic background. This is followed by an attempt to explain why more than 600 men and women from the Netherlands and Belgium have joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq. What were their motivations? In order to answer this question, we focus on push and pull factors that have been mentioned in scholarly and governmental reports. Next the article deals with their roles in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Based on open sources,⁵ it describes the process of vetting and training after their arrival, the role of the men in the violent conflict, and the specific role of women in territories occupied by the organizations IS and JaN. In the final section, we reflect on the limitations of this research and arrive at a number of general observations.

The phenomenon of (jihadist) foreign fighters

The phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new to the Low Countries. The first type of foreign fighters the recently independent state of Belgium and the country it separated from, the Netherlands, were confronted with were the so-called Papal Zouaves. These were Catholic youngsters who gave heed to the call of Pope Pius IX to assist him in his struggle against the Italian Unificationists in the 1860s. Some 1910 Dutch and 686 Belgians left for Rome to fight.⁶ More than half a century later, in the 1930s, some 1700⁷ Belgians and 650⁸ Dutch joined the International Brigades that fought in Spain to help the Republican cause against the Nationalists headed by general Franco. During World War II, thousands joined the ranks of the Waffen-SS: between 22,000 and 25,000 Dutch⁹, and 10,000 Flemish speaking Belgians and 6700 Francophone Belgians.¹⁰ Such high numbers seem to be a thing of the past. In the decades after World War II until recently, the phenomenon of foreign fighters had shrunk to just a few individuals who joined groups abroad, ranging from Palestinian organizations in the Middle East to left-wing groups in Latin America. In the Netherlands, the most famous non-jihadist foreign fighter is Tanja Nijmeijer, who got engaged in the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), and who is currently part of the FARC delegation in the peace talks with the Columbian government in the city of Havana, Cuba.¹¹

The phenomenon of jihadi foreign fighters is relatively new. It started at the turn of the century when individuals or small groups of friends tried to join the violent jihad in places such as Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, and Somalia. Some died just after their arrival. Such was the case of two Dutch youngsters of Moroccan background who went to India in December 2001 and who were killed in the streets of Srinagar in Kashmir, apparently before they could make contact with local jihadist groups.¹² Many failed to even reach the war zones where they wanted to fight. In 2003 two other Dutch youngsters were arrested in Ukraine while trying to cross the border with Russia, allegedly on their way to Chechnya.¹³ Some did manage to reach the battlefields and join jihadist groups. Among them was at least one woman: Muriel Degauque, a Belgian convert to Islam who committed a suicide car bomb attack on US soldiers in Iraq in December 2005.¹⁴ The total number of these 'early' jihadist foreign fighters was relatively small – perhaps only a dozen who managed to join a jihadist group. Hence, until 2012, the authorities in the Low Countries were not very worried about the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters. It was seen as an isolated phenomenon of individuals and small local networks mostly characterized by their inactivity and limited size.¹⁵ In the fall of 2012, the situation changed drastically. Partly as a result of extensive media and Internet attention to the conflict in Syria, rather suddenly, dozens of jihadists started to travel from the Low Countries to Syria.¹⁶

It took until early 2013 before the authorities publicly sounded the alarm bell. In February 2013, the head of the Dutch secret service, the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), went on television warning about a rapid growth in the number of Dutch youngsters going to Syria to join the armed struggle against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, among others on the side of JaN, an organization linked to Al Qaeda. This warning was followed by the quarterly Terrorism Threat Assessment (DTN) of March 2013,¹⁷ which raised the threat level from 'limited' to 'substantial', the second-highest threat level on a scale of four. Around the same time, the European Union's judicial cooperation unit Eurojust officially confirmed that Belgians were also fighting in Syria. In Belgium in 2013, the jihadist foreign fighter phenomenon became front page news, and reports and articles on these fighters appeared weekly. Many of these fighters were affiliated with a Belgian organization called Sharia4Belgium.¹⁸ This organization has been described as an 'atypical but extremist Salafist organization'.¹⁹ Sharia4Belgium was founded by Muslim youngsters in Antwerp on 3 March 2010 and was declared a terrorist organization by the Antwerp Correctional Tribunal in February 2015. Despite its short existence, it contributed significantly to the growth of the Belgian jihadist scene²⁰ and may be regarded as an important factor in explaining why Belgium has 'produced' relatively many jihadist foreign fighters.

The growth of the number of these fighters in Belgium was spectacular: from about 70 according to the first official estimate in March 2013,²¹ to 388 according to data provided by the Belgian minister of the interior in February 2016.²² In the Netherlands it grew from a few dozen in early 2013,²³ to an estimated 220 by early 2016.²⁴

Who are they?

Who are these jihadist fighters from the Low Countries, and what are their characteristics? Using Sageman's methodological framework, we have looked at a number of characteristics that make up the 'biographies' of the men and women from Belgium and the Netherlands who have joined a jihadist organization in Syria or Iraq. The database, consisting of 370 cases, serves as the empirical basis for the overview below. In addition, occasionally, we refer to other relevant sources that add insight into the question of who these jihadists are.

Geographical origin

The Belgian and Dutch jihadist foreign fighters generally have the nationality of, were born in, or resided in Belgium or the Netherlands. Most persons have parents who were born in Morocco or were born there themselves (46%), followed – at a distance – by persons of Belgian, Dutch, Turkish, Syrian, Russian (Chechen), Somali, and Algerian extraction (Table 1). Other sources speak of an

Table 1. Family of origin.

	Dutch jihadists (N = 66)	Belgian jihadists (N = 54)	Total sample (N = 120)
Parents born in Morocco or born there themselves	41%	50%	46%
Parents born in Turkey or born there themselves	13%	5%	8%

Table 2. Average age (measured at the time of departure).

	Dutch jihadists (N = 82)	Belgian jihadists (N = 85)	Total sample (N = 167)
Average age	23.2	23.8	23.5

even higher percentage of people of Moroccan descent – up to 80% according to the Soufan Group in the case of Belgium.²⁵

Their place of recruitment proved difficult to determine. For those cases for which we could find reliable information, it often coincided with the last known place of residence. This place of residence could be determined for 122 Dutch jihadists. More than 70% of those resided in one of the four main urban agglomerations in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. The majority of them lived in the greater The Hague area, which also includes the cities of Delft and Zoetermeer. With regard to the Belgian cases, of which we could determine the place of residence for 203 persons, more than 65% were from Antwerp or Brussels. Another significant number of Belgian jihadists came from the city of Vilvoorde located in Flanders, just north of Brussels. Other cities and towns with a sizable group of jihadist foreign fighters include Maaseik, Kortrijk, Ghent, and Genk (all located in Flanders), and Liège (the biggest city of Wallonia).

Age

The average age of the jihadist foreign fighters is 23.5 years old (Table 2). Their statistical distribution is very spread out: the youngest person was only 13 years old when he left, while the oldest was already 67. Most of them are not (late) adolescents, but young adults, being in their early or mid-twenties. The female jihadists in the sample are on average younger than their male counterparts.²⁶ Among them are several underage jihadi-brides who joined their (future) spouse in Syria or Iraq.

Regarding age, Belgian and Dutch jihadists differ from other groups of jihadists from the past, as studied by Sageman and Bakker. Their studies show that most persons who joined the jihad in the period between the 1990s and 2009 did so while being well past adolescence. The average age in the study of global Salafi jihadists by Sageman is 25.7.²⁷ That of homegrown jihadists in Europe,

Table 3. Sex.

	Dutch jihadists (N = 159)	Belgian jihadists (N = 211)	Total sample (N = 370)
Male–female ratio	76–24	84–16	81–19

studied by Bakker, was 27.3.²⁸ Furthermore, their findings show that the average age of joining the jihad increased during these two decades.²⁹

Sex

Of the 370 cases of Belgian and Dutch jihadists in the dataset, 81% are male. Although in both countries the majority is male, the share of females is a lot higher in the Netherlands (Table 3). This difference is also noted in other sources. For instance, Van Ostaeyen claims females represent less than 10% of the group of Belgian jihadists, while AIVD figures state that one in three Dutch jihadists is female.³⁰

A high proportion of males among jihadists is also found by both Sageman and Bakker.³¹ However, the number of females among the jihadist foreign fighters is considerably higher than in the aforementioned studies of jihadists in the past. It should also be noted that nearly all of those that have been reported to have died in Syria and Iraq are male.³²

Faith

Approximately half of the jihadists were raised as Muslims. Some were raised in orthodox families. Of the cases for which we could find reliable information on their faith as youth, many were not strict observers of all traditions and obligations. The dataset of Belgian and Dutch jihadists also shows that 6% of the persons converted to Islam before traveling to Syria or Iraq. This number reflects official figures as provided by the OCAD, which also speak of 6% being converts.³³ According to van San, most of these Dutch and Belgian converts are women.³⁴

Of the jihadists for which information could be collected on religious devotion prior to traveling to Syria or Iraq, most of them showed signs of intensification of religious beliefs. This manifested itself in for instance wearing traditional clothes, increased visits to mosques or praying, and/or increased interest in the study of religious texts. Similar manifestations of more intense religious devotion were found by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol who, for instance, observed stricter compliance with Islamic dietary laws.³⁵

Table 4. Background.

	Dutch jihadists (N = 30)	Belgian jihadists (N = 15)	Total sample (N = 45)
Lower class origin	67%	47%	60%
Middle class origin	33%	47%	38%
Upper class origin	0%	6%	2%

Table 5. Occupational status.

	Dutch jihadists (N = 32)	Belgian jihadists (N = 34)	Total sample (N = 66)
Employed	21%	27%	25%
Unemployed	41%	32%	36%
Student	38%	41%	39%

Socioeconomic background and education

The data on the socioeconomic status of the families of the Belgian and Dutch jihadists indicate that they almost exclusively stem from the lower and middle strata of society (Table 4). The distributions among the three classes in society somewhat differs between the two groups. In the case of the Netherlands, the majority are of lower class origin (67%) and a minority from middle class background (33%). In the case of Belgium, the jihadists are evenly spread over these two classes (47%) and a small minority is of upper class origin (6%).

Regarding education, some of the jihadists had only finished primary education. For others, a high school diploma was the highest achieved degree. Relatively many had at least vocational training, and a few had followed education at a higher level (together they represent 47%). Of this group, however, most did not finish their education. Some dropped out just before traveling to Syria or Iraq – either as the result of bad grades, bad behavior, or by their own decision. Others were still enrolled at the time of their departure. Others were too young to have either vocational or higher educational experience. This explains the relatively low level of those that finished education beyond the level of high school. According to Coolsaet, in Belgium, only a small minority held a college degree.³⁶

Regarding occupational status, of those for which we could find reliable information, many were unemployed (Table 5). Of those that were employed, their occupational status was mainly within the category unskilled worker.³⁷ There were also a few within the category of professionals.³⁸ A few jihadists, both among the Belgian ones and the Dutch, were known to have served in the military before joining the jihad. Many were students at the time they left for Syria and Iraq.

Finally, data on relative deprivation proved difficult to collect. Signs of economic, social, and/or political deprivation have nonetheless been identified in 6% of the cases in the database – comparable with Bakker's findings.³⁹

Table 6. Marital status.

	Dutch jihadists (N = 50)	Belgian jihadists (N = 37)	Total sample (N = 87)
Married	64%	78%	70%

Psychological make-up

In his study of the psychological make-up of 140 Dutch jihadists, Weenink showed that 60% of them had psychological problems.⁴⁰ Using a very wide definition of such problems, he found problems as diverse as a ‘problematic social setting’, petty and serious criminal offenses, and diagnosed mental health issues. The latter is found in almost 9% of the sample. This is a lot higher than the data in our sample – using a narrower definition — that suggest that 2% of the Dutch and Belgian jihadists had some sort of psychological disorder before traveling to Syria. These disorders include feeble-mindedness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, and claustrophobia. This 2% is in line with earlier findings by both Sageman and Bakker.⁴¹ However, according to Coolsaet, the foreign fighters ‘yearning to place themselves at the centre of events [...] reflects a degree of narcissism that was largely absent among their older predecessors’.⁴²

Regarding criminality, based on our data, roughly 20% of the Belgian and Dutch jihadists has been suspected of criminal activity prior to departure. In the case of Belgium, a distinction should be made between the first group of jihadists that left for Syria and later groups. The first group was composed mainly of members from pre-existing networks, mainly Sharia4Belgium which was regarded as a terrorist organization by a Correctional Tribunal in Antwerp in 2015.⁴³ According to Coolsaet, whereas most individuals of the first group were known to the police (partly because of their link to Sharia4Belgium or because of ordinary crimes), this was less so for those that followed the first wave. Those that left at a later stage ‘showed no signs of deviant behavior and nothing seemed to distinguish them from their peers’.⁴⁴

Social affiliation

Most of the jihadists for which information on marital status could be collected were married,⁴⁵ despite being relatively young – on average 23.5, including quite a few teenagers. Among Belgian jihadists, 78% were married, compared to 64% among the Dutch (Table 6). This might be explained by the fact that, on average, the Dutch were a bit younger than their Belgian counterparts. Among the married were also women who went together with their husbands or joined them later on.

In many instances, the jihadist foreign fighters were closely connected to one another by way of family bonds and/or friendships. The latter category includes both larger groups – sometimes networks of radicals — and smaller

groups of two or a few friends. Such pre-existing social affiliations often seem to have played an important role in (collective) recruitment – as will be discussed in the next section.

Why did they go?

What has caused more than 600 men and women from Belgium and the Netherlands to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq? There seem to be many factors that play a role, which can be divided into push and pull factors. In addition, propaganda and recruitment that stress both types of factors also seem to have contributed to the growth of this phenomenon. Moreover, the first jihadists with combat experience that returned to the Low Countries also seem to form a source of inspiration for potential fighters.

Push factors

As mentioned in the previous section, many of the Belgian and Dutch jihadists are part of the lower strata of society and have relatively low levels of education (which is partly related to their young age). However, jihadists do not solely stem from the lower socioeconomic strata of society, nor are they all poorly educated. Therefore, socioeconomic characteristics alone do not explain the phenomenon of jihadist foreign fighters. There are however factors that are partly linked to these characteristics that seem to hold more explanatory value. Research on Dutch jihadist foreign fighters showed that many of the jihadists grew up in deprived neighborhoods, that they had difficulties at school or at work, confrontations with the authorities, traumatic experiences, and (the perception of) being confronted with all kinds of injustice.⁴⁶ Against this backdrop, some of the Dutch jihadists showed strong frustrations about their own societal position in the Netherlands or that of their ethnic group.⁴⁷ Some of them also showed feelings of apathy and a lack of meaningfulness in their lives prior to traveling to Syria. As a consequence, some persons no longer felt they had a future in the Netherlands.⁴⁸ This also seems to be the case for the Belgian jihadists. According to Coolsaet,

one cannot fail to notice how frequently [the Belgian jihadists] refer to the absence of a future, to personal difficulties that have to be coped with in everyday life. Often these stories point to a desire to leave all this behind, to be 'someone', to be accepted.⁴⁹

Coolsaet also stresses the importance of feelings of injustice and discrimination as the decision to join the jihad in Syria seems to a large extent found in how one feels.⁵⁰ Such feelings also played a role in the Netherlands, and not only for those on the fringes of society. Based on her research on Dutch and Belgian jihadist foreign fighters, Van San states that those that are well integrated raise their societal expectations, and consequently are more susceptible to social

exclusion and (perceived) discrimination.⁵¹ Such feelings seem to be strongly felt among those from Moroccan families.⁵² For others, leaving the Netherlands or Belgium presented an opportunity to break with their criminal, corrupted, Western lifestyle. In some cases, this meant escaping prison sentences or debts. In other instances, it meant leaving a place where nothing really happened, in pursuit of excitement.⁵³

Pull factors

Jihadist foreign fighters are not only persons who leave their place of residence, but are, perhaps first and foremost, persons who go to a certain place abroad to fight. In the case of Syria, especially during the early stages of the conflict, (images of) the brutality committed by the al-Assad regime in combination with the 'international paralysis'⁵⁴ served as an important justification to pick up arms against the Syrian regime.⁵⁵ Extensive media coverage of the Syrian conflict also played a role.⁵⁶ According to the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), Sunni Muslims increasingly came to see the regime of Bashar al-Assad as representing an infidel sect that brutally repressed the majority Sunni population.⁵⁷ In Belgium, this narrative was propagated by Sharia4Belgium and like-minded groups.⁵⁸ In the Netherlands it was propagated by groups like Behind Bars/Street Dawa, Sharia4Holland, and the 'Context group'.⁵⁹ As the war progressed, the religious and sectarian aspect became the dominant narrative. The rise of jihadist groups and the conflicts between these and other groups further contributed to the chaos and bloodshed in the country. To some, this infighting meant that they could no longer identify with the battle fought in Syria and hence they decided not to travel abroad.⁶⁰ For many others, the rapid ascent of ISIS, the establishment of the caliphate, and the impression of unstoppable expansion boosted the appeal to join the jihad.⁶¹ According to Bakker and Grol, among the Dutch jihadists there is a strong – often persistent – conviction that traveling to Syria is the right thing to do, now or in the future. This conviction can be based on ideals or on specific personal needs and desires, and it is often a mixture of both.⁶² Among the personal factors that contribute to the appeal of joining the violent jihad are the need for a sense of belonging, fraternity and comradeship, respect, recognition, acceptance by a group, identity, adventure, heroism. Factors of a more religious and ideological nature include the appeal of living under strict Islamic law, contributing to an ideal state, and that of martyrdom.⁶³ In particular, living under Islamic law in the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS seemed an important motivation for a number of Dutch jihadists that were studied by Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol.⁶⁴ Some regard migrating to the caliphate as a religious obligation – referred to as *hijrah*. It is however important to stress that the role of religion and the extent to which persons see the idea of joining the jihad as a religious duty is difficult to assess. According to a French judge specializing in terrorism cases, 90% of the jihadists

traveled to Syria because of various personal motives, and only 10% did so out of religious beliefs.⁶⁵ Still, as noted earlier, many Belgian and Dutch jihadists showed an increased interest in religion in the period before they left for Syria or Iraq. These people proved to be susceptible to the idea of the violent jihad and that of organizations such as JaN and ISIS. Another religious pull factor is the apocalyptic vision that the Syrian conflict heralds the end of the world as foretold in seventh-century prophecies.⁶⁶

These 'attractions' of the jihad in Syria and Iraq are propagated by various jihadist groups, both in the two countries and outside the region. According to Hegghammer, Syria is probably the most 'socially mediated' conflict in modern history.⁶⁷ In particular, ISIS seems to have been successful in propagating the 'caliphate narrative.'⁶⁸ It also managed to present a 'romantic' idea of the caliphate as well as of the jihadist battlefield.⁶⁹ For instance, al-Baghdadi's call to those with certain specific occupations (e.g. doctors and technicians) to join ISIS suggests employment opportunities of a supportive nature. Furthermore, jihadist parties are in control of large areas in Syria, which suggests that it is possible to take part in the jihad while to some extent avoiding both combat and deadly enemy raids.⁷⁰ This has made joining the violent jihad in Syria and Iraq attractive for an unusually diverse group of people when compared to the situation in the past.⁷¹ These dynamics might help explain the diversity within the group of Belgian and Dutch jihadists, which consists of both very young and very old persons, of male and female jihadists, and even families with children.

Social dynamics

Many of the Dutch and Belgian jihadists that have traveled to Syria had contact with ideologically like-minded people in person, via the Internet, and/or via social media. As noted in the previous section, many of them were connected through friendship, kinship, or both. During the early stages of the Syrian conflict, a number of jihadist networks also played an important role, enhancing the push and pull factors and bringing them together, in particular in Belgium.⁷² Their role seems quite clear as the main places of residence of the Belgian and Dutch jihadists to a large extent coincide with the presence of these networks in these towns and urban regions. In many cases, these organizations did not shy away from the public spotlight. They openly promoted their jihadist and anti-democratic views. Among these groups were inspiring or charismatic figures or 'facilitators' who managed to underline the push factors and strengthen the 'attractiveness' of the jihad in Syria.⁷³ Furthermore, through social dynamics such as group think and peer pressure, those that participated in these networks were conditioned to go on jihad.⁷⁴ These organizations seem to have played a decisive role in the case of Belgium. According to the head of the Belgian State Security Service (VSSE), Sharia4Belgium can be considered as the main incubator of departures.⁷⁵ This organization also had an impact in the Netherlands.

According to the AIVD, the first wave of jihadist departures from the Netherlands to Syria 'was probably attributable to the close contacts between Behind Bars/Street Dawah and Sharia4Belgium. Individuals associated with the two movements were at the heart of that sudden exodus.'⁷⁶

Another important social dynamic is 'chain migration' or peer recruitment. This dynamic has been observed by both Belgian and Dutch authorities.⁷⁷ Most of those who decided to travel to the Syria or Iraq already know someone inside territory controlled by ISIS: family, friends from their old neighborhood, friends with whom they played soccer together, former classmates, etc.⁷⁸ Often, the would-be jihadists are persuaded to come by those that are already there.⁷⁹ Concrete examples of this form of peer recruitment are the departures of relatively large groups of friends from the Dutch cities of Delft and The Hague and the Belgian city of Vilvoorde who left for Syria and Iraq in different waves.

What do they do out there?

Belgian and Dutch jihadists travel to Syria and Iraq mainly through Turkey, usually via the Turkish province of Hatay.⁸⁰ After crossing the Turkish–Syrian border, the foreigners are picked up by a contact and taken to a safe house. The jihadist groups operate safe houses for specific groups of foreigners, based on a common language. The Belgian (Flemish) and Dutch jihadists are often accommodated at the same location.⁸¹ There, the men and women will be separated, and possessions will be confiscated and searched for chips and GPS equipment.⁸² For a period of approximately two or three weeks, the new recruits will be interrogated and closely monitored to identify possible spies.⁸³

After this interrogation phase, the men will undergo several training courses at a training camp. This separation between time spent at a safe house and time spent at a training facility may vary. At times, interrogation and training seem to happen rather simultaneously. The entire 'preparatory phase' (i.e. inquiries as well as training) seems to take two or three months on average.⁸⁴ Training includes lessons in the Arabic language, religion, and military training.⁸⁵ The latter covers training to improve one's physique, to cope with hunger and cold, to learn how to use various weapons (mainly the Kalashnikov, rocket propelled grenades, and hand grenades), and to become familiar with combat techniques and strategies.⁸⁶ Usually before taking part in this military training, new recruits need to swear an oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*). This pledge of allegiance occurs before entering the ranks of either ISIS⁸⁷ or JaN,⁸⁸ and entails that one will comply with the assigned duties, regardless whether one agrees or disagrees with the given tasks. While in training, the recruits are generally not sent to the frontlines, yet they can be assigned with guard duties (*ribat*). This serves as a first practical experience in being part of an army and taking part in an armed struggle.

After the training phase, recruits will, in principle, be deployed on the basis of their competences and wishes, and will be prepared accordingly.⁸⁹ Most recruits can choose between becoming a fighter, committing a suicide attack, or fulfilling certain supporting activities.⁹⁰ The options for the latter seem diverse, and include jobs as an engineer, a hacker, a doctor, an administrative worker, a cook, a driver, or a job at the religious police or a Sharia court.⁹¹

The Dutch jihadists generally appear to choose the life of a fighter.⁹² Similarly, most Belgian jihadists can be found at all the ISIS fronts.⁹³ After completing the training courses, the foreign fighters will be assigned to a battalion under the command of an *emir*. These battalions seem, like the safe houses, to be organized on the basis of a shared language. Hence, Belgian (Flemish) and Dutch jihadist fighters are often within the same 'battalion'. These battalions are not continuously engaged in combat. A considerable amount of time at the front lines is spent on other armed tasks, such as guarding checkpoints and patrolling.⁹⁴ Moreover, as in all armies, periods at the front lines are alternated with duties in the hinterland, including performing tasks in pursuit of the jihadist cause, such as guard duty or *dawah* (i.e. inviting others to Islam through dialog).⁹⁵

The salary of the jihadists from Western countries varies between \$300 and \$800 per month.⁹⁶ Other 'benefits' of being a soldier can include war loot and female slaves.⁹⁷ According to the AIVD, when ISIS conquers a village or area, it is not unusual that its members – whether ordered to do so or not – resort to torture and rape.⁹⁸ The extent to which Dutch and Belgian jihadists are involved in these or other war crimes is difficult to tell. There is a video of Dutch-speaking jihadists who take part in a beheading.⁹⁹ Others have committed suicide attacks against civilian targets. Those that do not have a role as a soldier are primarily tasked with supporting activities. For instance, a Dutch boy told his parents that he was a cook,¹⁰⁰ and a Belgian jihadist is assumed to be in charge of the religious police (*al-Hisbah*) in Raqqa.¹⁰¹ Such supporting activities are nonetheless often difficult to see separately from the violent jihad. Violence seems to be inherent to certain supporting jobs. For instance, this is the case with *al-Hisbah* agents, who are engaged in addressing, arresting, and punishing those who have violated the rules of ISIS. The boundaries between a violent and non-violent role are also blurred by the fact that almost all men receive a rifle (usually a Kalashnikov) and are expected to be armed.¹⁰² Finally, as new recruits need to swear an oath of allegiance to the jihadist organization that they have joined, they can – regardless of their assigned role – be called upon to engage in combat or in other violent activities. Everyone who has sworn this oath and is not primarily a fighter is thus in fact a reservist. Young boys, viewed as the fighters of the future, are prepared for this role from an early age. The doctrine of ISIS is taught at schools, and the necessary weapon and combat skills are practiced at training camps for boys.¹⁰³

Among the Dutch and Belgian jihadists are persons that hold relatively important positions.¹⁰⁴ There are indications that some have risen to the rank

of *emir*, i.e. commander of a unit. Others are believed to hold high supportive positions, such as the earlier mentioned *al-Hisbah* example, or play a focal role in spreading propaganda for ISIS or other jihadist groups.

The life of women is rather different than that of men. Their primary role is to quickly marry, raise children, and to obey their husband. They serve society from behind the scenes, in principle being only able to leave the vicinity of their house while being veiled and in the company of a male relative.¹⁰⁵ The Belgian and Dutch wives in Raqqa often visit each other when their husbands are away during the day.¹⁰⁶ They have only a few options to regain some of the liberties they lost after joining ISIS. As education and health care is separated according to gender, some female jihadists are teachers and nurses.¹⁰⁷ Women can also join the ranks of the all-female religious police unit: the *al-Khansaa* brigade. This brigade controls the adherence of women to moral conduct according to ISIS standards. Like the *al-Hisbah*, it has the mandate to enforce ISIS's rules and to punish those that disobey the rules, among other sanctions using whipping.¹⁰⁸ *Al-Khansaa* agents are armed, yet women in general – in contrast to male jihadists – do not receive a weapon. They do however have the opportunity to arm themselves, and many allegedly carry a firearm in their purses.¹⁰⁹ Many ISIS women also play an important role in ISIS propaganda and are active in recruiting other women.¹¹⁰ It should be noted that Dutch jihadists seem more often than their Belgian peers to have been involved in disseminating propaganda to a targeted audience or a wide public.¹¹¹

General observations

Above, we have provided an overview of the characteristics, motivations, and roles of Belgian and Dutch jihadists that have left for Syria and Iraq. It is based on data that we gathered for just over half of the total amount of cases as estimated by the Dutch and Belgian authorities. Hence, it does not provide a complete overview. Moreover, the N is relatively small, which also limits the possibility of making generalizations regarding this phenomenon. Against this backdrop, and stressing the need for more research, we would like to conclude this article with a number of preliminary general observations.

First of all, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new to Belgium and the Netherlands. That of jihadist foreign fighters, however, is relatively novel, although both countries saw examples before 2012. Both Belgium and the Netherlands experienced a rapid growth of jihadists starting late 2012 and early 2013.

Second, many of the general assumptions regarding European foreign jihadist fighters are more or less supported by the data collected on Dutch and Belgian fighters. They are indeed relatively young (23.5), though not (late) adolescents, but rather young adults. They are mainly of migrant background (46% have parents born in Morocco) and are part of the lower strata of society

(60%). Despite their relatively young age, a surprisingly high number are not single, but married (70%), or even married with children. According to figures of the AIVD, there are about 70 Dutch children in ISIS-controlled territories.

Comparing Dutch and Belgian jihadists, we see that the two samples are very similar when looking at the following characteristics: geographical origin, age, education, and occupational status. When looking at the motivations to join the jihad, we note that both groups are believed to have done so for a wide variety of reasons ranging from a lack of meaningfulness to social exclusion and (perceived) discrimination. Their activities and roles in the conflict in Syria and Iraq are also very similar for Dutch and Belgian jihadists.

Dutch and Belgian jihadists differ when looking at the size of the phenomenon (Belgium 'producing' almost twice the number of jihadist foreign fighters compared to the Netherlands) as well as the percentage of women, which is a lot higher among the Dutch. They also differ somewhat when looking at marital status (78% of the Belgians are married compared to 64% of the Dutch) and socioeconomic background (that of the Belgian fighters being higher than that of the Dutch). Regarding motivations to leave for Syria and Iraq, the role of networks in propagating the jihad has been more important in Belgium than in the Netherlands.

These empirical data and the comparison between the jihadists from Belgium and the Netherlands provide more insight in the who, why, and what questions surrounding the phenomenon of jihadism in Europe. Comparison with other countries is needed to be able to explain why some countries have 'produced' more jihadists than others and what factors may be more important than others in explaining the characteristics and development of the phenomenon in general. To that end, we should not only focus on other European countries, but also non-European countries, such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia from which thousands have left for the battlefields in Syria and Iraq and whose citizens fight alongside their jihadist comrades from Europe.

Notes

1. Those that are fighting in the region and those that have returned, see '117 Syriëstrijders in België'.
2. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 6. The report also speaks of about 70 children – of whom one-third were born in Syria or Iraq and two-thirds were brought there by one or both parents.
3. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 69–120.
4. This figure represents more than half of the number of 608 jihadists as estimated by Dutch and Belgian authorities by early 2016. We would like to point out Reinier Bergema's role in collecting the data on Dutch jihadists.
5. Based on interviews and a variety of open sources including newspapers, governmental reports, academic literature, weblogs, and social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Telegram), we have gathered information on the life of (mainly Dutch-speaking) jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

6. *New York Herald*, 10 June 1868, quoted in Marraro, 'Zouaves in Papal Army', 83.
7. Lefebvre, quoted in Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War*, 468.
8. *Ibid.*
9. In 't Veld, *De SS en Nederland*, 406.
10. De Wever, 'Militaire collaboratie in België', 36–7.
11. Stock, 'A Dutch Guerillera'.
12. Karskens, 'De laatste dagen van'.
13. Bakker, 'Islamism, Radicalisation and Jihadism', 174.
14. For more information on this case, see De Stoop, *Vrede Zij met U*.
15. E.g. see De Koning et al., 'Een zee van ongelooft', 73–4; NCTV, 'Dreigingsbeeld Nederland September 2012', 2.
16. AIVD, 'Jaarverslag 2012', 10; Zelin, 'ICSR Insight'.
17. NCTV, 'Terrorism threat level raised'.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Moniquet, 'Sharia4Belgium Atypical but Extremist'.
20. Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'; Van Vlierden, *How Belgium Became Top Exporter*.
21. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 3.
22. See note 1.
23. NCTV, 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 32'.
24. NCTV, 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 40', 1.
25. Barrett, 'Foreign Fighters in Syria', 17.
26. The average age of women whose age could be determined (N = 41) is 21.5 years old: two years younger on average than their male counterparts.
27. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 112.
28. Bakker, 'Jihadi Terrorists in Europe', 41.
29. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 92; Bakker, 'Jihadi Terrorists in Europe', 41; Bakker, 'Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists', 141.
30. Van Ostaeyen, 'February 2016 Statistical Update'; AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 6.
31. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*; Bakker, 'Jihadi Terrorists in Europe', 36; Bakker, 'Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists', 141.
32. NCTV, 'Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 40', 1; Van Ostaeyen, 'February 2016 Statistical Update'. Of the Dutch jihadists, between 2012 and 2016, 42 have been reported dead by the authorities – all male. Of the Belgian cases, according to Van Ostaeyen, 81 have been killed. This count includes two females. The death of at least one Belgian women has been confirmed by the Belgian authorities.
33. De Bont, 'Belgian and Dutch Fighters', 39.
34. Van San, 'Lost Souls Searching for Answers'.
35. Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol, 'Who Are They', 108.
36. Coolsaet, 'Facing the Fourth Wave', 9.
37. Unskilled workers include cleaners and factory workers, etc.
38. Professionals (highly skilled workers) include medical doctors, army officers, scientists, etc.
39. Bakker, 'Jihadi Terrorists in Europe', 42; Bakker, 'Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists', 142.
40. Weenink, 'Behavioral Problems and Disorders'.
41. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 80–1; Bakker, 'Jihadi Terrorists in Europe', 40; Bakker, 'Characteristics of Jihadi Terrorists', 141.
42. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 8.
43. AIVD, 'Jaarverslag 2012', 24, 29–30; Coolsaet, 'Facing the Fourth Wave', 3; De Koning et al., 'Een zee van ongelooft', 78, 265.

44. Coolsaet, 'Facing the Fourth Wave', 3.
45. Under Dutch or Belgian law or under Islamic law.
46. E.g. see: Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?'; Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol, 'Who Are They'; De Graaf, 'Nederlandse strijders in buitenland'.
47. Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol, 'Who Are They', 107.
48. Bakker and Grol, 'Motives and Considerations', 13; De Koning, *Waar hebben we het over*.
49. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 17.
50. Coolsaet, 'Facing the Fourth Wave', 3.
51. Van San, *Hoe beter geïntegreerd*.
52. Coolsaet, 'Facing the Fourth Wave', 34.
53. Weggemans, Bakker and Grol, 'Who Are They'; Bakker and Grol, 'Motives and Considerations', 13; De Koning, 'Waar hebben we het over'.
54. OHCHR, "paralysis" on Syria. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights referring to the international indifference.
55. Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'; Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 17.
56. Boeke and Weggemans, 'Destination Jihad'.
57. NCTV, *Analysis of the Phenomenon*.
58. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 17.
59. In December 2015, the high-security court in Amsterdam declared that the Context group's 'inner circle' formed a 'criminal organization with terrorist intent' – a terrorist organization. Suspects were sentenced up to six years in prison.
60. Bakker and Grol, 'Motives and Considerations', 13.
61. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 19.
62. Bakker and Grol, 'Motives and Considerations', 13.
63. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 19; De Koning, 'Waar hebben we het over'.
64. Weggemans, Bakker and Grol, 'Who Are They', 14.
65. 'Le juge Trévidic'.
66. E.g. see Wood, *What ISIS Really Wants*. It is, according to the Prophet, in the Syrian city of Dabiq where the armies of Rome will set up their camp and where the armies of Islam will meet them for a decisive battle. The Muslim victory will mark the beginning of the end of the world.
67. Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.
68. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 3.
69. Bakker and Grol, 'Motives and Considerations', 13.
70. Hegghammer, 'Syria's Foreign Fighters'.
71. Ibid.
72. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 21.
73. Bakker and Bergema, 'Impact of Jihadist Insurgencies'.
74. Coolsaet, 'What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?', 21.
75. Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'.
76. AIVD, 'The Transformation of Jihadism', 13.
77. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS'; Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'.
78. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 5; Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'.
79. Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'.
80. AlDe'emeh and Stockmans, *De jihadkaravaan*, 114–15; Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 48.
81. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 48.
82. Groen, 'Wat zich werkelijk afspeelt'.

83. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 48–9.
84. Ibid., 51.
85. Ibid., 49–50.
86. Ibid.; AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 7; Hassan, 'Secret World'; Al-Tamimi, 'Principles in the Administration'.
87. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 7; Speckhard and Yayla, 'Eyewitness Accounts from Defectors', 97.
88. Benotman and Blake, 'Jabhat al-Nusra', 7.
89. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 7; Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 50.
90. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 7.
91. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 51.
92. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 7.
93. Raes, 'Lessons Learned from Verviers'.
94. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 17; Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 53.
95. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 53.
96. Ibid., 67–8.
97. Ibid., 67–8, 71.
98. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 8.
99. 'Video: Belgian Fighters Behead Man'.
100. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 51.
101. E.g. see: 'Rechterhand Belkacem'.
102. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 53.
103. AIVD, 'Leven bij ISIS', 9; Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 57; Al-Tamimi, 'Principles in the Administration'.
104. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 53.
105. Winter, 'Women of Islamic State', 7; Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 56.
106. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 58.
107. Neurink, *Vrouwen van het kalifaat*, 66–7.
108. Weggemans et al., 'Bestemming Syrië', 54.
109. Ibid, 70.
110. Ibid, 54.
111. Bunnik and De Zoete, 'The Gloves Come Off'.

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